MARVEL

4

SOULE
CUMMINGS
OLAZABA
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STAR WARS
HIDDEN EMPIRE

WHAT DARKNESS LIES WITHIN THE FERMATA CAGE?

STAR WARS

HIDDEN EMPIRE

PART 4

"RINGS"

DREAMING OF A FREER GALAXY, **LADY QI'RA** AND HER ORGANIZATION, **CRIMSON DAWN,** HAVE WAGED A SECRET WAR AGAINST THE EMPIRE.

QI'RA ACQUIRED A MEANS OF PREVAILING AGAINST THE SITH IN THE ***FERMATA CAGE,*** AN ARTIFACT THAT SUPPOSEDLY SUSPENDED AN ANCIENT SITH LORD IN TIME. QI'RA TASKED THE ARCHIVIST WITH UNLEASHING THIS SITH AGAINST THE EMPEROR AND ACTIVATED HER OPERATIVES ACROSS THE GALAXY TO SERVE AS A SMOKE SCREEN. THE EMPEROR RETALIATED AGAINST CRIMSON DAWN, FORCING QI'RA TO HER STRONGHOLD DAWNFALL, WHERE A CRIMSON DAWN FLEET PREPARES TO STRIKE AGAINST THE EMPIRE.

A FAILED ATTEMPT TO UNLOCK THE FERMATA CAGE NEARLY KILLED THE ARCHIVIST, AND THE DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE IT PRODUCED SERVED AS A BEACON TO DARTH VADER. QI'RA DISPATCHED CHANATH CHA AND THE ORPHANS TO DEFEND THE ARCHIVIST AND THE ARTIFACT. CHANATH CHA AND THE ORPHANS FOUGHT VALIANTLY BUT PROVED NO MATCH FOR DARTH VADER.

HOWEVER, THEIR SACRIFICE ALLOWED THE ARCHIVIST TO ESCAPE, PROVIDING CRIMSON DAWN A FINAL OPPORTUNITY TO ENACT THEIR PLAN....

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LORD VADER... TELL ME, YOU WERE IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE *FERMATA CAGE.*

LADY QI'RA CLAIMED IT CONTAINS AN ANCIENT *SITH LORD,* TRAPPED INSIDE FOR AN AGE.

DID YOU SENSE SUCH A PRESENCE?

I SENSED A GREAT INTENSITY OF THE *DARK SIDE,* MY MASTER. NOTHING MORE.

IT HAS BEEN SOME TIME SINCE I LAST USED MY *LIGHTSABER,* MY APPRENTICE.

SPAR WITH ME.

SHHK

OF COURSE, MY MASTER.

SSSK

IF THERE *IS* A SITH INSIDE THE FERMATA CAGE, THEN THERE WOULD BE *THREE*. YOU, ME AND THIS OTHER.

KRCK

BUT THERE CAN BE ONLY THE MASTER AND THE APPRENTICE. IT IS PERHAPS THE ONLY TRUE *LAW* OF THE SITH.

THE RULE OF TWO MUST BE ENFORCED. IF NECESSARY...

VZZSK

...I SHALL ENFORCE IT.

RRRAGH!

ENOUGH, LORD VADER.

THAT IS ENOUGH.

QI'RA KNOWS WE CAN SENSE HER ATTEMPTS TO OPEN THE FERMATA CAGE. THE NEXT TIME SHE TRIES, SHE KNOWS WE WILL COME. WE HAVE NO CHOICE.

IT IS A BEAUTIFUL TRAP, WELL LAID.

THE WOMAN UNDOUBTEDLY BELIEVES HERSELF CLEVER. INDEED, PERHAPS SHE IS. CERTAINLY BRIGHTER THAN THE DIM LIGHT OF *MAUL*.

SHKK

SHE WILL BE MISSED.

The *Siroto*.

I CAN OPEN THE ***FERMATA CAGE***, QI'RA. I'M SURE OF IT.

BUT IT'S ***INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS***. MY EXPERIMENTS HAVE PROVEN THAT THE ARTIFACT REQUIRES ***FUEL*** TO OPEN...OR ***FOOD***, YOU MIGHT SAY.

IT EATS THE ***DARK SIDE***--AND IF IT CAN'T GET IT, IT MAKES DO WITH ANY LIFE IN THE VICINITY.

I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE TELLING ME, ***ARCHIVIST***. IS THERE A WAY TO USE IT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THE DEATH OF ITS OPERATOR?

POSSIBLY. I KNOW A PLACE, A HIDDEN, ANCIENT PLACE, FILLED WITH ***BOTH*** THE DARK SIDE AND ABUNDANT ***LIFE***.

IF THERE IS ANYWHERE IN THE GALAXY IT MIGHT BE SAFE TO OPEN THE FERMATA CAGE, WITH ENOUGH FOOD FOR ITS APPETITES... IT IS THERE.

VERY GOOD. CHART A COURSE. WE HAVE NO TIME TO WASTE.

I...AM NOT SURE I CAN DO THAT, LADY QI'RA. THE CAGE TAKES TIME TO BUILD UP A SUFFICIENT CHARGE TO OPEN, AND THE SITH WILL SENSE THE MOMENT THE PROCESS BEGINS.

THEY WILL COME, AND I HAVE LOST ***THE KNIGHTS OF REN*** AND ***KHO PHON FARRUS***. CHANATH CHA AND HER ORPHANS DIED TRYING TO HOLD OFF LORD VADER.

I HAVE NO DEFENDERS. I WILL BE SLAUGHTERED LONG BEFORE THE CAGE OPENS.

I BELIEVE IN OUR CAUSE. I HATE THE SITH AND WANT THEM DEAD AND GONE. THAT MIGHT EVEN BE WORTH MY LIFE.

BUT I WON'T THROW IT AWAY IF THERE'S NO CHANCE AT ALL. AND RIGHT NOW...

...THERE ***IS*** NO CHANCE AT ALL.

I UNDERSTAND, SAVA, AND I AGREE.

GO. MAKE YOUR PREPARATIONS. I PROMISE YOU...

Dawnfall Base.
Hidden fortress of Crimson Dawn.

...I WILL GIVE YOU THAT CHANCE.

DID YOU JUST LIE TO HER?

NO. I WILL DO EVERYTHING I CAN, *CADELIAH*. WE'VE COME TOO CLOSE TO FAIL NOW.

THEN... WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

DESPITE PALPATINE'S BEST EFFORTS, ALL HIS PURGES OF MY AGENTS AND THREATS TO MY ALLIES...I AM NOT COMPLETELY WITHOUT RESOURCES.

I AM *LADY QI'RA OF CRIMSON DAWN.*

PEOPLE WILL TAKE MY CALL.

--YOU MUST SEE IT, *DEATHSTICK*. WE ARE SO CLOSE TO ACHIEVING EVERYTHING WE DESIRE--REVENGE, A REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN THE GALAXY... *FREEDOM*.

YOUR HELP NOW COULD BE *INVALUABLE*.

I AM IMPRESSED WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE ACHIEVED, QI'RA. I WISH YOU WELL. BUT I AM NOT A WARRIOR OR A GUARD. I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR *FOOT SOLDIERS*.

I AM AN *ASSASSIN*.

EVERYTHING YOU ASKED OF ME... I DID. I HAVE DONE MY PART.

FIND SOMEONE ELSE.

ARE YOU *JOKING?*

ASKING US TO COME BACK AND PLAY NURSEMAID TO THAT CRANKY OLD LADY AGAIN, AFTER SOME OF US HAVE *DIED* TRYING TO MAKE YOUR STUPID PLAN WORK?

THE LADY NEVER STRUCK ME AS THE HUMOROUS TYPE, REN.

I'D SAY SHE'S JUST A LYING, DELUDED *IDIOT.*

HEAR ME OUT. THAT'S ALL I ASK.

The *Night Buzzard.*

WHAT DO YOU THINK, MARINDA?

NOT ABOUT WHAT I THINK. IT'S YOUR CALL, BOSS.

GO AHEAD, QI'RA.

ENTERTAIN US.

I UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE RELUCTANT. YOU TRUSTED ME, YOU UNDERTOOK AN INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS MISSION FOR ME THAT PUT YOU RIGHT IN THE SITH'S CROSSHAIRS.

AND, YES...SOME OF YOU DIED.

FYODOR... BAZZRA...

IF YOU THINK KNOWING THEIR *NAMES* IS GOING TO MAKE US GO WEAK IN THE KNEES...

NOT AT ALL. KNOWING THE NAMES OF PEOPLE WHO DIE FOR MY CAUSE IS THE SMALLEST THING I CAN DO.

IT MEANS VERY LITTLE.

ALL THAT MATTERS IN THE LINE OF WORK WE ALL SHARE IS *KEEPING ONE'S WORD.*

I PROMISED THE KNIGHTS OF REN THAT IF THEY HELPED ME, WE WOULD BRING DOWN THE SITH. I STAND BY THAT. THE GOAL IS ALMOST ACHIEVED.

BUT I *NEVER* PROMISED IT WOULD HAPPEN WITHOUT COST.

YES. YOU HAVE PAID A TERRIBLE PRICE. REPEATEDLY. BUT CONSIDER YOUR SITUATION. DARTH VADER *KNOWS YOU ATTACKED HIS FORTRESS.*

HE HAS UNDOUBTEDLY INFORMED PALPATINE.

YOU WILL BE RUNNING AND HIDING FROM THE SITH FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. THEY FOUND AND KILLED ALL THE JEDI. THEY CAN CERTAINLY TRACK DOWN THE *KNIGHTS OF REN.*

DO YOU *WANT* THAT? RUNNING FOREVER, HUNTED LIKE ANIMALS? I AM YOUR ONLY CHANCE TO AVOID THAT LIFE.

I WILL SEND YOU THE COORDINATES.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS.

YOU KNOW...

...SHE MAKES A PRETTY GOOD POINT.

I'M JUST A KID, BUT EVEN I CAN SEE YOU'RE GETTING DESPERATE, QI'RA.

YOU HAVE... EVERYTHING, AND YOU'RE ON THE VERGE OF LOSING IT ALL, MAYBE EVEN YOUR OWN *LIFE*. I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

WHY DON'T YOU JUST QUIT? WALK AWAY? USE ALL YOUR CREDITS AND BECOME SOMEONE ELSE?

BECAUSE IF I DID THAT, CADELIAH...

...THEN WHO WOULD I BE?

I WILL LEAVE SOON. MOST LIKELY, YOU WILL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN--EITHER BECAUSE I AM DEAD, OR BECAUSE I HAD TO RUN.

YOU WILL BE SAFE HERE. IN FIVE DAYS, IF I HAVE NOT CONTACTED YOU, PLAY THIS MESSAGE.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND, CADELIAH?

I... SURE. I CAN DO THAT.

SHOULD I THANK YOU, LADY QI'RA?

ONLY IF YOU THINK IT WILL GET YOU SOMETHING, CADELIAH.

WELL...THIS IS SURPRISING.

IT SHOULDN'T BE. YOU HATE THE SITH AS MUCH AS I DO.

I HAVE AN OFFER FOR YOU.

I THINK YOU'LL FIND IT VERY INTERESTING.

The Amaxine Station.

ALL RIGHT, YOU HUNGRY, EVIL THING.

I'VE SET YOU UP WITH ALL THE LIFE AND DARK ENERGY YOU COULD EVER WANT.

HOPE YOU LIKE *SALAD.*

THIS *IS SO DANGEROUS.* I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M ACTUALLY GOING TO--

...

OKAY.

HERE... WE...*GO!*

SHHHKK

BEEP

THANK YOU.

THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH.

SOME OF YOU ARE WITH THE DAWN FLEET FOR MONEY. SOME FOR LOVE OR HATE OR OUT OF LOYALTY OR FEAR OR A THOUSAND OTHER REASONS AND TREASONS.

I DON'T CARE *WHY* YOU ARE HERE. I ONLY CARE THAT YOU *ARE*. YOU WON'T BELIEVE ME--BUT THIS DAY ISN'T ABOUT ME. FOR IT TO WORK...IT HAS TO BE ABOUT YOU. EACH OF YOU.

RIGHT NOW, I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER SPECIFIC MOMENTS. SOME WILL BE LARGE, SOME SMALL--BUT EVERY ONE OF YOU HAS THEM, NO MATTER THE REASON YOU ARE HERE.

THE MOMENTS OF FRUSTRATION AND ANGER AND DESPAIR AND PAIN AND FEAR AND RESENTMENT AND JUST THE SENSE THAT THINGS *ARE NOT FAIR*.

NOT IN PALPATINE'S GALAXY, ANYWAY.

BECAUSE TO HIM, YOU ARE SMALL.

TO HIM, YOU ARE *IRRELEVANT*.

TO HIM, YOU ARE *PIECES ON A BOARD*.

YOU ARE TAXPAYERS AND WORKERS AND SOLDIERS BUT NOT REALLY PEOPLE AT ALL. YOU ONLY EXIST TO HIM AS THINGS TO CONTROL. PARTS OF A MACHINE.

AND THE WORST PART IS...

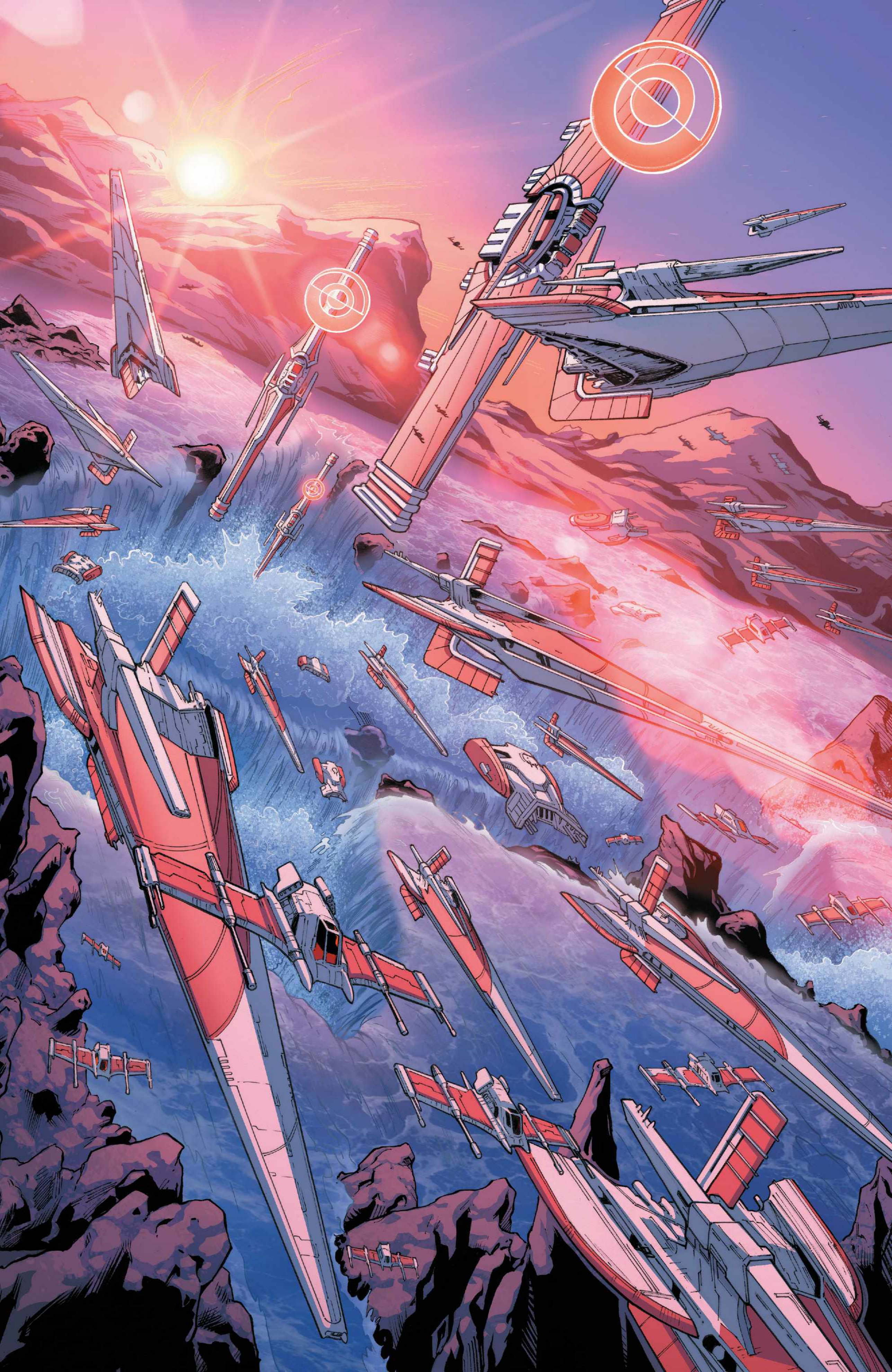
...*I AM TELLING YOU NOTHING YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW.*

I AM NOT ASKING YOU TO REBEL.

I AM ASKING YOU TO DO SOMETHING YOU *ALREADY WANT TO DO*.

TAKE ALL THAT RESENTMENT, TAKE ALL THAT FEAR, TAKE ALL THAT PAIN AND EVERYTHING YOU ALREADY KNOW DEEP IN YOUR HEART ABOUT THE ROT AT THE CENTER OF THIS GALAXY.

AND *SHOVE IT DOWN PALPATINE'S THROAT!*



VARRRRR

OH... OH MY.

KRRRCK

YOU WEREN'T JUST HUNGRY. YOU WERE STARVING.

EH?

OH NO.

I THOUGHT... I THOUGHT I'D HAVE MORE TIME.

DO YOU SENSE IT, MY APPRENTICE?

YES, MY MASTER.

THE FERMATA CAGE IS OPENING.

YOU WISH TO BOARD THAT STATION, LORD VADER.

I *SENSE YOUR DESIRE.*

TO POSSIBLY MEET AN ANCIENT SITH, ONE SO DANGEROUS THEY WERE LOCKED AWAY IN SUCH A POWERFUL PRISON AS THE ***FERMATA CAGE.***

TO FEEL THEIR POWER.

TO TEST YOURSELF AGAINST IT. AND THEN...

...TO ***DESTROY*** THEM. OR EVEN...TO ***BE DESTROYED.***

I DESIRE IT TOO, LORD VADER.

BUT IT IS A ***FOOLISH*** DESIRE.

AND I AM NOT A FOOL.

ISSUE THE NECESSARY ORDERS TO DESTROY THAT STATION. USE THE FULL POWER OF THE ***EXECUTOR.*** I WANT IT DONE FULLY AND ***WITHOUT DELAY.***

YES, MY EMPEROR. IMMEDIATELY.

MULTIPLE CONTACTS DROPPING OUT OF HYPERSPACE!

IT'S... AN ENTIRE ***FLEET.***

REBELS?

NO, MY APPRENTICE.

"THIS IS CRIMSON DAWN."

DAWN FLEET, EXECUTE THE ATTACK PLAN!

CLASS-TWO AND THREE CRAFTS, WITH ME. WE NEED TO TARGET THE STAR DESTROYER'S LONG-RANGE CANNONS.

CLASS ONE, THEY'RE GOING TO BE LAUNCHING THEIR FIGHTERS ANY SECOND. KEEP THEM OFF US.

TRANSPORTS, GET TO THE STATION AND TAKE UP GUARD POSITIONS--MAKE SURE THE ARCHIVIST CAN DO WHAT SHE NEEDS TO.

THIS IS IT, MY FRIENDS. NOW, AND ALWAYS...

"...AWAIT THE DAWN."

THE ATTACKING FIGHTERS POSE NO REAL THREAT, MY EMPEROR, BUT THEY HAVE SPECIFICALLY TARGETED OUR LONG-RANGE WEAPONRY.

WE HAVE BEEN FORCED TO DIVERT POWER TO THE SHIELD BATTERIES, WHICH MEANS THERE MIGHT BE A SLIGHT, *AH*, ***DELAY*** BEFORE WE CAN EXECUTE YOUR ORDER TO DESTROY THE STATION.

HOW SLIGHT, ADMIRAL?

SLIGHT, YOUR MAJESTY.

BAH. PREPARE A TRANSPORT.

WE CAN TAKE NO CHANCES, LORD VADER.

WE WILL DO THIS *OURSELVES.*

YES, MY MASTER.

THE IMPERIALS WILL DEPLOY GROUND TROOPS TOO--JUST A MATTER OF TIME. WE CAN'T BE VERY FAR AHEAD OF THEM.

SECURE THIS HANGAR. I'LL TAKE A FEW PLATOONS AND HEAD UP THROUGH THE STATION TO FIND THE ARCHIVIST AND SET UP A PERIMETER. AWAIT THE DAWN.

YES, CAPTAIN. MY TEAM'S ON IT. AWAIT THE DAWN.

ALL RIGHT, PEOPLE, FIND COVER AND *DIG* IN!

MAKE SURE YOU'VE GOT GOOD LINES OF SIGHT, CHECK YOUR WEAPONS AND PREPARE FOR A *TARGET-RICH ENVIRONMENT!*

LIGHT 'EM UP!

THIS PLACE IS FULL OF SECRETS, LORD VADER. I SENSE DEEP WAVES OF DARK SIDE ENERGY... AND NOT ALL ARE OF THE TYPE GENERATED BY THE FERMATA CAGE.

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT WE WILL FIND HERE, MY APPRENTICE.

NO MATTER WHAT WE ENCOUNTER, WE MUST BE GUIDED BY ONE PRINCIPLE.

NO SURVIVORS.

SSK

SHHK

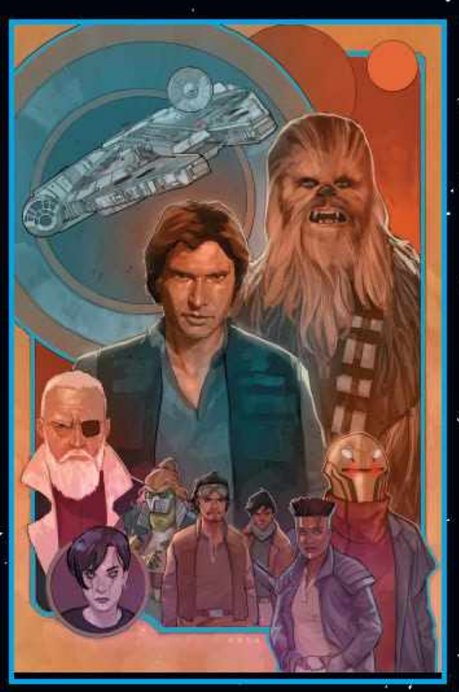
To be concluded....

NEXT

HIDDEN EMPIRE 5

THE SAGA ALSO CONTINUES IN...

STAR WARS
STAR WARS 32



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HAN SOLO & CHEWBACCA 10

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BOUNTY HUNTERS 32

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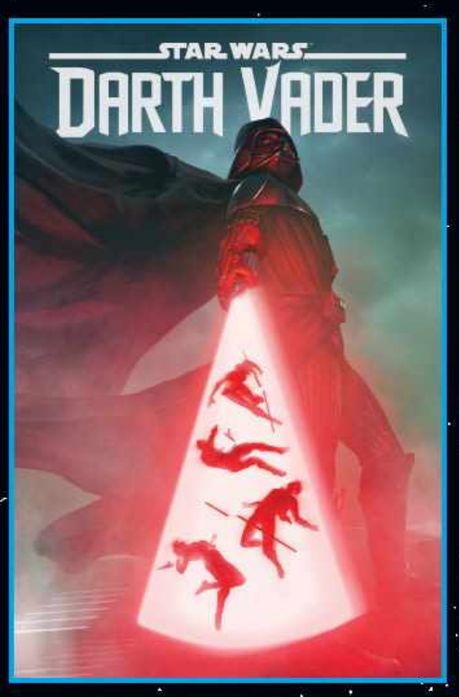

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